This thesis is my own work and all the sources used in its composition have been acknowledged.

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Corrections as requested

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SWIFT AND ATTITUDES TO WOMEN IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY VERSE SATIRE

Submitted for the degree of Master of Arts

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL VIEWS OF SWIFT'S SATIRES ON WOMEN

Where Swift's prose satires have been much discussed and much praised, his satiric verse has received relatively little critical attention and little positive appreciation. The attention given those of his verse satires concerning women has been scant and not always appropriate. These poems have continued to provide problems of 'taste', where his equally 'shocking' prose satires have not. The Yahoos' filthiness has generally been allowed by critics[1] to work as a double-edged satiric device aimed at what is base in human nature, and at the same time, via Gulliver, at what is pretentious. But the scatology in Swift's verse satire, in particular that in the Celia poems, has yet to be placed satisfactorily in the satirical structure of those poems. The following poems fall into a group for two reasons. Firstly, they are, or include, attacks on women. Secondly, where the method is clearly satire, the object of the attack is not always clear. The focus changes disturbingly, often shifting suddenly from female folly to female nature itself, so that while the reader is always disturbed (a response appropriate to satire), he cannot always identify what it is that he is

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1 e.g. L.A. Landa, introduction to Gullivers Travels, ed. L.A. Landa (Cambridge, Mass. 1960), p.xxiii; Irvin Ehrenpreis, The Personality of Jonathan Swift (Cambridge Mass., 1958), p.109;
Robert Hunting, Jonathan Swift (N.Y. 1967), pp. 109-112;
Ricardo Quintana, The Mind and Art of Jonathan Swift (N.Y. 1936) p.321;
Maynard Mack, 'Gullivers Travels' in Swift ed. Tuveson (N.J. 1964) pp. 112-113;
John F. Ross, 'The Final Comedy of Lemuel Gulliver' in Swift, as above pp. 84-85.

disturbed about.[1] The following poems constitute that group of Swift's satirical poems against women to which I will refer throughout this thesis: 'Phyllis, or the Progress of Love' (1719), 'The Progress of Beauty' (1719), 'The Progress of Marriage' (Jan. 1721-22), 'A Lady's Dressing Room'(1730), 'A Beautiful Young Nymph...' (1731), 'Strephon and Chloe' (1731) and 'Cassinus and Peter' (1731).[2] The serious critical objections to these poems, particularly to the 1730-31 group, will be discussed in this chapter. My own objections are not in terms of taste, which has been the criterion chiefly used in judging the poems, but in terms of argument. The poems purport to expose a variety of follies and affectations, but in nearly every case the force of the attack is deflected away from folly, the proper object of attack, and onto what seems to me not a proper object, female nature itself.

When D.H. Lawrence attacks the writer of the Celia poems, he does not attack Swift as satirist; his criticism is non-literary.[3] For Lawrence, the question of satiric masks does not arise. He identifies the historical Swift

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1 See Katherine M. Rogers "'My Female Friends': The Misogyny of Jonathan Swift," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, I (1959), pp.366-79. Ms. Rogers discovers in Swift's writings an unconscious misogyny covering the physical aspects of women.

2 Swift's Poems, ed. Harold Williams, (Oxford, 1937). All texts of Swift's poems discussed in this thesis are from this edition, hereafter cited as Poems.

3 D.H. Lawrence, Selected Literary Criticism ed. A. Beal, (London, 1955), p.29.

with the outraged protagonists of Swift's poems. From this viewpoint, the poems are not satire at all, but documentary evidence of Swift's madness. As such, they are more properly in the domain of the psycho-analyst than the literary critic. Lawrence writes

> There is a poem of Swift's which should make us pause. It is written to Celia, his Celia - and every verse ends with the mad, maddened refrain: "But - Celia, Celia, Celia Shits!" Now that, stated baldly, is so ridiculous that it is almost funny. But when one remembers the gnashing insanity to which the great mind of Swift was reduced by that and similar thoughts, the joke dies away. Such thoughts poisoned him, like some terrible constipation. And why, in Heaven's name? The fact cannot have troubled him, since it applied to himself and to all of us. It was not the fact that Celia shits which so deranged him, it was the thought. His mind couldn't bear the thought. [1]

Middleton Murry, like Lawrence, treats these poems as biographical material. He finds they support his thesis of Swift's increasing insanity and its cause:

> Swift's attitude to women was always ambivalent. He attracted them and was attracted by them. He spent endless pains in trying to change them into what they were not, and in suppressing his fear of what they were... [2]

This account of Swift's attitude to women fits quite neatly, in the first place, the 'Stella' poems and 'Cadenus and Vanessa' ('trying to change them into what they were not'), and in the second ('suppressing his fear of what they were'), the satiric poems. Murry finds: 'in 1731 there was an upsurge of peculiarly revolting coarseness in Swift's writing'.[3] He attributes this development to encroaching madness in Swift, and adds, as a further biographical explanation, that as at the time of writing

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1 D.H. Lawrence, p.29.

2 J. Middleton Murry, Jonathan Swift (Oxford, 1954), p.437.

3 Murry, p.437.

these poems, Stella and Vanessa were both dead, Swift had nothing to restrain his bitterness against women. The fact that Swift, at this stage, was approaching old age is similarly significant for Murry. When Murry writes: 'one cannot read Swift's writing of 1729-1732, without feeling that he is positively obsessed by human excretion[1], and judges the poems to be 'utterly inhuman', his position is essentially the same as that of Lawrence. Like Lawrence, he fails to perceive any satiric distance between the historical Swift and the _personae_ in the poems. He discusses the poems as if they were entirely non-ironic, and finds in them proof that Swift was, at the time of writing them, insane. To support this interpretation, he quotes from a letter written by Chancellor Yorke in 1742:

> Dean Swift has had a statute of lunacy taken out against him. His madness appears chiefly in incessant strains of obscenity and swearing - habits to which the more sober parts of his life were not absolutely strangers.

I do not propose to follow Lawrence and Murry in their common method of arguing from Swift's life to his poems and back again. Apart from the circularity of this approach, in the case of Swift's life, data about significant events, such as his supposed marriage to Stella, is inconclusive. If the poems are to be considered as literature, it is to them mainly we should look. Swift's idiosyncrasies and final mental decay[2] did not prevent him from writing brilliant prose satire; I can see therefore no

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1 Murry, p.439.

2 The 18th century view that Swift was mad has been greatly modified in 20th century scholarship. T.G. Wilson, 'Swift's Personality and Death Masks', A Review of English Literature v.3, No. 3, (July 1962), pp. 39-68, argues that Swift was not mad, but was a life-long sufferer from bilateral Menieres disease, a disease caused by a disorder of the internal ear, of which giddiness, vomiting, head noises and deafness are symptoms. Wilson argues that Swift died of senile decay and that at no time until his terminal illness was he in any way incapable.

reason why this material should be used to explain in full the unsatisfactory aspects of his verse satire.

Neither, on the other hand, can the objections raised by Lawrence and Murry be dismissed as completely irrelevant; the scatological material in the poems does constitute a problem. The problem is partly, though not entirely, one of taste. The question of taste alone is satisfactorily answered if one considers the traditional characteristics of the genre of satire, to which it seems to me these poems clearly belong (though neither Lawrence nor Murry discusses them in this light). Certainly the problem had been identified in Renaissance satire:

> The preoccupation of all the members of the English School [Renaissance] with the sins and perversions of sex is so marked that a critic must assume that the satirists... were pathologically attracted to the unsavory subject or that lustful practices constituted in their time the most dangerous enemy to social decency... moreover satires on other subjects betray almost an obsession of the writer's mind by an interest in matters of sex. 1

Swift's shocking methods and materials were neither new nor idiosyncratic, though as early as 1921 these aspects of satire were being regarded as matters of psychoanalytic rather than literary interest:

> It has already been noted that obstetrical and sexual subjects are prominent in medical satire, as are references to excremental organs, functions and material e.g. Rabelais' Gargantua and Gulliver's Travels. Dr Coriat thinks that though such satire may be highly symbolised, it is nevertheless a literary cover for a vicarious fulfillment of obscene or sexual tendencies, general sadism or hostile impulses toward fellow beings. 2

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1 O.J. Campbell 'The Elizabethan Satyr-Satirist and his Satire' in Comical Satyre and Shakespeare's 'Troilus and Cressida', (California, 1938), ~~pp. 24-53, p.44 - p.46~~ pp. 44, 46.

2 Mary Claire Randolph 'The Medical Concept in English Renaissance Satiric theory' in Studies in Philology XXXVIII (April 1941), ~~pp. 125-57~~, p. 155.

Using this kind of psychoanalytic interpretation, Norman O. Brown makes an ambitious attempt to define what the poems are really about. According to Brown, all Swift's scatological images - excrement as offerings, excrement as aggression, and so on - have had their validity confirmed by post-Freudian analysis:

> ...if we are willing to listen to Swift we will find startling anticipations of Freudian theorems about anality, about sublimation, and about the universal neurosis of mankind. 1

While Brown's observation about this correspondence between eighteenth century wit and twentieth century psychoanalysis is of historical interest, his argument about the poems begs the critical question: for Brown, the real theme of the poems is

> ... the conflict between our animal body, appropriately epitomised in the anal function, and our pretentious sublimations, more specifically the pretentions of sublimated or romantic Platonic love. In every case it is a "goddess", "so divine a creature", "heavenly Chloe", who is exposed; or rather what is exposed is the illusion in the head of the adoring male, the illusion that the goddess is all head and wings, with no bottom to betray her sublunary infirmities.
>
> The peculiar Swiftean twist to the theme that Celia [illegible] is the notion that there is some absolute contradiction between the state of being in love and an awareness of the excremental function of the beloved. 2

In dismissing this 'absolute contradiction' as a 'peculiar Swiftean twist', Brown fails to grapple with the central ambiguity of the poems. He sees in the poems a logical sequence of the results of man's attempts to sublimate his animal nature: from 'A Lady's Dressing Room', where sublimation is possible, to 'Strephon and Chloe', where sublimation must be cultivated at all costs, to 'Cassinus and Peter', where the sublimated vision is shattered.

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1 Norman O. Brown, Life Against Death (N.Y. 1959), p.186.

2 Brown, pp. 186-7.

His view leaves the internal complexities of each poem unaccounted for.[1] Brown's attempt to establish some sort of symbolic equation between Swift's 'excremental vision' and the lie that is all civilization,[2] is not convincing. However, my most serious criticism of Brown's thesis is that it entirely neglects what I consider to be the most consistent and forceful dimension of the poems taken as a group, the assumption of the inherent obscenity of female nature.

Another critical approach to the poems does treat them as satire: according to Northrop Frye, the structure of satire is the parody of Romance.[3] Critics who have discussed the poems in literary rather than psychoanalytic terms have dealt with the element of parody almost exclusively. But it seems to me that classifying the poems as 'mock-heroic' or 'anti-romantic', without coming directly to terms with the scatological and obscene material, does not account for their dramatic effect. Certainly, the object of the satire in 'A Lady's Dressing Room', 'Strephon and Chloe', and 'Cassinus and Peter' is partly the romantic delusions in the heads of 'literary' lovers; but (as I hope my subsequent discussion of the poems will establish) more is happening in most of the poems than this straightforward kind of deflation. It is in this more that the force, but also the difficulties, of the poems lie.

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1 For an effective deflation of Brown's 'sequence' argument see D. Greene, 'On Swift's "Scatological" Poems', Sewanee Review (1967), pp. 672-689.

2 Brown, pp. 187 – 188

3 Northrop Frye, 'The Mythos of Winter, Irony and Satire' in The Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957), ~~pp. 223-39~~, p. 233.

Quintana offers a faint defence of the poems as parody:

> The most reviled of Swift's poems, 'The Lady's Dressing Room', 'A Beautiful Young Nymph...' 'Strephon and Chloe', 'Cassinus and Peter'...are not to be explained by morbidity alone... they are parodies on sentimental poetry, styptics to the sensual imagination. [1]

The matter of morbidity is raised and dismissed in the same sentence. The poems are not discussed further. Robert Hunting dismisses them just as unsatisfactorily: he finds 'the unprintable poems' 'funny and wise' and completely defuses their explosive effect with the jovial but inadequate comment that 'Swift's device was monstrously unfair to the ladies. But his point is clear enough: 'he simply did not believe in nymphs'.[2] Ehrenpreis also offers a simple explanation for what is happening in these complicated poems: for him Swift is doing no more than attacking the current literary fashion of praising women for imaginary charms. He finds a close parallel between Swift's 'Progress' poems and Hogarth's 'Harlot's Progress', both of which, as he sees it, fit into the popular tradition of attacks on women.[3] He concludes that it is the tradition that is shocking and not, in the case of Swift, the man himself.[4] In a similar vein, Herbert Davis ascribes many of Swift's poems to literary motives.[5] He regards the 'Progress' poems as 'a more violent attack on poetic cant'.[6] For Davis, the whole significance of the Celia poems

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1 R. Quintana, The Mind and Art of Jonathan Swift, pp. 65-66.

2 Robert Hunting, Jonathan Swift, p. 74.

3 Prints of Hogarth's 'Harlot's Progress' were published with a poem by Joseph Gay and Breval called 'The Lure of Venus or the Harlot's Progress' in London in 1733. The poem is not a satire but a fictional narrative in verse inspired by Hogarth's work.

4 Irvin Ehrenpreis, The Personality of Jonathan Swift, ch. 2. pp. 29-49.

5 Herbert Davis, 'Swift's View of Poetry' in Jonathan Swift Essays on His Satire and Other Studies (N.Y. 1964), pp. 163-198.

6 Davis, p. 180

> ...lies in the fact that Swift hated the sentimentality of the ordinary Romantic love stuff...Instead of rapturously describing the beauty of the body, or the poetry of the dress, and all that stimulates desire, he is as usual turning things upside down, and with complete lack of restraint exposing the ugliness and unpleasantness of certain physical functions...1

Here Davis assumes a fundamental realism in Swift's method; Swift destroys the illusions of romance and displays things as they are. My argument, to be developed later, is that Swift replaces one distorted vision, the romantic, with another, his own. Among the group of critics just quoted, there is a consensus of opinion that Swift's satires on women are straightforward attacks on the sentimental and nothing more: it is with that view that I wish to take issue in this thesis.

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1 Davis, p. 194.

CHAPTER 2

ATTITUDES TO WOMEN IN THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

Whether this group of poems can be properly discussed in purely literary terms as satire, or whether they are mainly of interest to the student of the psychology of repression is a question not yet satisfactorily answered. I hope to establish that the poems do work in poetic terms, that they are original and forceful, but that they are finally 'odd' in a way that reveals some of the weaknesses, as well as the strengths, of Swift as verse satirist. Before proceeding to discuss the poems, it is appropriate to make some assessment of how far Swift's attitudes to women were typical of his time, and how far they were idiosyncratic. The satirist may see himself as a reformer, but usually his values are conservative and conformist, not progressive or individualistic:

> The satirist claims, with much justification, to be a true conservative. Usually...he operates within the established framework of society, accepting its norms, appealing to reason...as the standard against which to judge the folly he sees. He is the preserver of tradition. [1]

Judged from his writings of all kinds, Swift's ideas about and reactions to women include an extremely wide range of attitudes to the sex; it is no simple matter to define one single tradition of proper female behaviour that he was attempting to preserve.

According to Irvin Ehrenpreis[2], for example, Swift shows remarkable independence in his views on the education of females and on the status of women. He attributes a positive feminism to Swift:

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1 Robert C. Elliott, 'The Satirist and Society', E.L.H. A Journal of English Literary History, XXI (Sept. 1954), ~~pp. 237-48.~~ p. 246

2 Irvin Ehrenpreis, 'Letters of Advice to a Young Spinster' in The Lady of Letters in the Eighteenth Century (Los Angeles, 1969).

> ...in these letters to Stella and Vanessa we can see how deeply his genius as an author is connected with, or derived from, his attitudes to women. [1]

If however, one applies this statement to Swift's satires on women, one finds that there does indeed appear to be such a connection, but that the attitudes in question are excessively derogatory. Ehrenpreis interprets Swift's proposal that the two sexes be educated alike as a marked break with the Puritan ideal of women as, at best, obedient wives, sober mothers, efficient housekeepers. He places Swift in the enlightened line of female education stemming from Sir Thomas More and Luis Vives.[1] Ehrenpreis' view can be supported by only a very restricted sample of Swift's writing; a close examination of views on women expressed by Swift in his non-satiric verse and prose, and a comparison of those views with others current in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries show that Swift's position is closer to Milton's than to Sir Thomas More's.

Plato's view, that women could be educated in the same way as men,[2] had many stronger adherents at the time than Swift. In 1696, the feminist writer Mary Astell asserted that there is 'no distinction of Sexes in Souls' and 'no natural Impediment in the structure of our Bodies'.[3] Turning her attention to the

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1 Ehrenpreis, op. cit., p.4.

2 That is, women of the elite class: 'For the production of a female guardian then, our education will not be one thing for men and another for women, especially as the nature we hand over to it is the same'. Republic V, 456d, in The Collected Dialogues of Plato ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (N.Y., 1964), p. 696.

3 Mary Astell, An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex, (London, 1696), pp. 11-12.

animal world, and to the labouring classes, she finds evidence for the natural equality of the sexes.[1] She admits dual roles: men for getting the sustenance of life, and women equipped for the orderly management of it. But she admits this duality only in the physical sphere; in the matter of the understanding she is Platonic: only education gives men an advantage over women:

> For a Man ought no more to value himself upon being Wiser than a Woman, if he owe his Advantage to a better Education, and greater means of Information, then he ought to boast of his Courage, for beating a Man, when his Hands were bound. 2

Interestingly, Ms. Astell anticipates contemporary feminism in her observation that the situation of women in some places resembles that of Negroes in slavery:

> ... that height of Severity, I may say Cruelty, it is now at in all the Eastern parts of the World, where the Women, like our Negroes in our Western Plantations, are born slaves, and live Prisoners all their Lives. 3

She is not loath to suggest a motive for such tyranny:

> ...For none can be Tyrants but Cowards. For nothing makes one Party slavishly depress another, but their fear that they may at one time or other become Strong or Courageous enough to make themselves equal to, if not superior to their Masters. 4

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1 Astell, p. 16 .

2 Astell, p. 20 .

3 Astell, p. 22 .

4 Astell, pp. 20-21 .

She is loath to accept the verdict of history about women:

> ...for if any Histories were anciently written by Women, Time, and the Malice of Men have effectively conspir'd to suppress 'em. 1

A year later, Daniel Defoe, writing on the education of women, pursues a similar vein:

> We reproach the Sex every day with Folly and Impertinence, while I am confident, had they the advantages of Education equal to us, they wou'd be guilty of less than ourselves. 2

Defoe's view of the natural capacities of women is even more feminist than Mary Astell's:

> The Capacities of Women are suppos'd to be greater, and their Senses quicker than those of the Men; and what they might be capable of being bred to, is plain from some Instances of Female-Wit, which this Age is not without, which upbraids us with Injustice, and looks as if we deni'd Women the advantages of Education, for fear they shou'd vye with the Men in their Improvements. 3

In regarding female wits as exemplary, Defoe evinces a very much more positive attitude than Swift or Pope, who both held female wits up to scorn.[4] So Swift, compared with Astell and Defoe, does not appear particularly progressive when he advocates reform of female education in order to render women more pleasant companions and fitter wives and mothers.[5]

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1 Astell, p. 23.

2 Daniel Defoe, 'The Education of Women', Essay Upon Projects (1697, reprinted Menston, England, 1969), p. 282.

3 Defoe, p. 284-5.

4 See Pope's treatment of Lady Mary Wortly Montagu, the model for 'Sappho' in 'Epistle to a Lady'.

See Swift's treatment of Mary de la Reviere Manly, who wrote The New Atlantis, and whom Swift satirized harshly in 'Corinna', Swift's Poems, pp. 149-150.

5 Such views are contained in 'Hints: Education of Ladyes', Prose Works of Jonathan Swift ed. Davis (Oxford, 1964), v.XII pp. 307-308.

Concurrently with the enlightened views on female education just discussed, a very different ideal of womanhood was being propagated by the Puritans. According to Puritan tradition, women were in the same category as children: totally dependent, irresponsible, prone to sin and requiring restrictive, authoritarian discipline to keep them from it. The more extreme version of this image is that of woman as the seducer of man, the source of physical and moral corruption. For John Knox, woman is made to serve man, and any departure from this constitutes a monstrous outrage against the order of nature sanctified by God.

> For who can denie but it repugneth to nature, that the blinde shall be appointed to leade and conduct such as do see? That the weake, the sicke, and impotent persones shall norishe and kepe the hole and strong, and finallie, that the foolishe, madde and phrenetik shall governe the discrete, and give counsel to such as be sober of mind? And such be al women, compared unto man in bearing of authoritie. [1]

A century later, Puritan divines were of the same mind as Knox. They regarded the family (extended to include servants) as the nucleus of organised religion.[2] The household was organised around a male head, who assumed priestly status in respect of the rest of the family, had absolute authority, and instructed the rest of the household including the wife in religion and morality. The most forceful expression of the puritan ideal of the male-female relationship, and the one most damaging to the feminist cause, was the description of Eve in Milton's 'Paradise Lost', published in 1667.[3] Adam and Eve appear

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1 John Knox, The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women (1558 reprinted Netherlands, 1972), p.9.

2 Christopher Hill, Society and Puritanism in Pre-revolutionary England (London, 1964), pp. 443-81.

3 Paradise Lost and Selected Poetry and Prose, ed. Northrop Frye (N.Y. 1951).

> Not Equal, as their sex not equal seemed;
> For contemplation he and valour formed,
> For softness she and sweet attractive grace;
> He for God only, she for God in him.(IV. 296-99)

and

> Subjection, but required with gentle sway,
> And by her yielded, by him best received
> Yielded, with coy submission, modest pride,
> And sweet, reluctant, amorous delay. (IV. 308-11)

Eve herself is conscious of her inferior status:

> O thou for whom
> And from whom I was formed flesh of thy flesh,
> And without whom am to no end, my guide
> And head! (IV. 440-43)

The reading public was being visited with such visions of submission at the same time as the saucy, independent heroines of Restoration comedy were appearing on the stage. So there was in the writing of this period no one, clearly identifiable trend so far as the role and status of women was concerned. But it will, I think, emerge that, in the values underlying his verse satires on women, Swift was a conservative in the Puritan tradition even if, as Ehrenpreis suggests, he took a relatively independent and progressive line on spinsters and female education.

If one looks at attitudes towards women immediately after Swift, that is, in the middle and towards the end of the eighteenth century, the picture is still complex. We may regard Dr Johnson as a representative voice of Establishment values. Like Swift, Johnson enjoyed the company of cultivated females, but the proper role he assigned to them was no less, perhaps even more, restrictive than Swift's. Dr Johnson found it right that women should have less liberty than men because

> If a woman has no inclination to do what is wrong, being secured from it is no restraint to her. (1778) 1

Equality of the sexes is an impossibility:

> It is plain... that one or other must have the superiority. As Shakespeare says, 'if two men ride on a horse one must ride behind'. (1778) 1

Johnson's opinion of women's moral character is not high:

> Women have a perpetual envy of our vices; they are less vicious than we are, not from choice, but because we restrict them, they are the slaves of order and fashion; their virtue is of more consequence to us than our own. (1784) 2

A woman's virtue was by this time defined not theologically but in the hard terms of middle class property values:

> The chastity of women being of the utmost importance, as all property depends upon it, they who forfeit it should not have any possibility of being restored to good character. (1776) 3

And adultery is less serious for a man than for a woman because

> Confusion of progeny constitutes the essence of the crime, and therefore a woman who breaks her marriage vows is much more criminal than a man who does it. A man to be sure is criminal in the sight of God; but he does not do his wife a very material injury, if he does not insult her; if, for instance, from mere wantonness of appetite, he steals privately to her chambermaid. Sir, a wife ought not greatly to resent this. I would not receive home a daughter who had run away from her husband on that account...(1768) 4

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1 Boswell, The Life of Johnson, ed. R.W. Chapman, corrected J.D. Fleeman (Oxford, 1970), p. 944.

2 Boswell, p. 1291.

3 Boswell, p. 702.

4 Boswell, p. 394.

Like Swift, Johnson believed that some education made a wife a more agreeable companion; Boswell reports the following:

> A gentleman talked to him of a lady whom he greatly admired and wished to marry, but was afraid of her superiority of talents: 'Sir, (said he) you need not be afraid, marry her. Before a year goes about you'll find that reason much weaker and that wit not so bright'. (1768) 1

If Johnson is representative of the conservative view of the status of women, the views of the notorious feminist Lady Mary Wortley Montagu do not provide as dramatic a contrast as one might expect. Lady Mary's own life [2] was a classical case of the making of a feminist. She acquired learning as a child by stealth; eloped to make an unsatisfactory marriage from which she liberated herself in fact, though never formally; travelled widely, wrote verse, political articles, numerous letters to wits, poets and admirers, contravened all accepted standards in her dress and social behaviour, and, according to her biographer Robert Halsband, in her own time

> was thus being put forward in the rising feminist movement as an extraordinary intellectual woman. 3

Despite all this, towards the end of her life she expressed views on female education more conservative than those of Swift or Dr Johnson. In 1753, advising her daughter Lady Bute about her granddaughter's education, Lady Mary advocated a full education for the girl, but recommended that her learning should be concealed with as much care as she might hide crookedness or lameness.[4]

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1 Boswell, p. 394.

2 Robert Halsband, The Life of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (Oxford, 1956).

3 Halsband, p. 100.

4 Halsband, p. 257.

Still, no single trend towards conservatism emerges at this time. In 1779, William Alexander published The History of Women,[1] a work which, though not as radically feminist as Mary Astell's, or Daniel Defoe's, interpreted history in a feminist manner. The study is very wide ranging; Alexander describes the position of women in many primitive and exotic societies, as well as contemporary mores in England and continental Europe. He offers as a general explanation for the inferior position of women their physical weakness which permits men to exercise tyranny over them. He offers many examples of societies where the natural equality of the sexes has been prevented by tyrannous social organisation; one such is America before the European invasion:

> ...the women were but little distinguished from the men by their dress, where any dress was made use of; nor were they much inferior to them in bodily strength, and hardly less patient of cold, hunger, thirst, or less qualified to hunt and to fish for their subsistence. But notwithstanding of this natural equality, the men had completely enslaved them, and thrown upon their shoulders all that could be called labour, either in the house or in the field... Thus oppressed and disheartened, the fair sex were entire strangers to the friendship of men, and not much the object of their love. 2

Alexander does find examples of social organisations where the role of women was different from this one, but he concludes:

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1 William Alexander, The History of Women from the Earliest Antiquity to the Present Time, (London, 1779).

2 Alexander, V.1, 15-16.

> The condition of the sex was not, however, properly adjusted to any medium: they were everywhere either exalted to a degree far beyond the dictates of good policy, and vested with powers and privileges of the most exorbitant nature, or sunk to a level with the beasts, and depressed by the most abject slavery.[1]

Alexander offers four reasons for the general ill-treatment of women, but only the last of these blames the woman herself for her situation. The first reason is that 'power, when not influenced by humanity, is commonly made use of only to enslave... the next cause is the insensibility of men, or that savageness of disposition which not only eradicates humanity but prompts only to animal appetite, instead of sentimental feelings of love... a third cause is, their general want of proper education and instruction... a fourth cause is ... their taking too little care to make themselves agreeable'.[2] He proceeds to offer a harsh criticism of slatterns, and champion though he is of the female cause, he never considers the possibility that slatternly behaviour may be more properly regarded as a result than a cause of woman's inferior position.

There is some evidence that at an earlier stage of the eighteenth century, what I have called the Platonic view of the nature of women was being encroached on by those attitudes which, more than a century later, characterized that society labelled 'Victorian'. The image of woman embodied in Milton's Eve is revived in the following lines by James Thomson:

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1 Alexander, V.1, p.16.

2 Alexander, V.1, pp213-14.

> In them 'tis graceful to dissolve at woe;
> With every motion, every word, to wave
> Quick o'er the kindling cheek the ready blush;
> And from the smallest violence to shrink
> Unequal; then the loveliest in their fears;
> And by this silent adulation soft,
> To their protection more engaging man.[1]
>
> (579-85)

From this very brief survey of kinds of attitudes to women dominant just before, during and just after Swift's time, we cannot conclude that Swift's view of women as inferior if, under certain circumstances, charming creatures, is idiosyncratic. From Milton to Johnson women are commonly regarded as weak and silly, needing a strongly authoritarian male influence to protect them from their own natures. None of this however accounts for the ferocity of Swift's attacks on women; it is in this ferocity, worthy of John Knox, but coming from a man immensely more urbane, a lover of women's company, a self-appointed improver of their minds, that the 'oddness', or contradiction, lies.

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1 James Thomson, 'Autumn', The Seasons and the Castle of Indolence, ed. John Buxton. (Oxford, 1972), p. 104.

CHAPTER 3

SWIFT'S NON-SATIRICAL POEMS ON WOMEN

Even if, on a specific matter like female education, Swift is closer to the progressive than the conservative writers of his time, his overall position on women is neither balanced nor egalitarian. In praising Stella, Vanessa and Biddy Floyd for their qualities of mind he may indeed have been reacting to the romantic vision of women still common among poets, but a closer examination of his non-satiric verse about women reveals what seems to me to be an equally harmful inability to accommodate the existence of women's physical nature. It is reasonable to assume that, in the 'Stella' poems, as in 'Cadenus and Vanessa', Swift is presenting his version of the desirable norms from which the viciously treated females in his satiric verse deviate so drastically.

'To Stella, Visiting Me...' (1720)[1] pays a typical compliment: Stella's chief virtue is her honour (1.6) which is a manly virtue, stolen, in this case, for Stella by Prometheus. Stella is most admirable (and most womanly) in the role of the silent nurse (109-16). In 'Stella, Who Collected and Transcrib'd ...' (1720),[2] the terms of praise are that Stella is admirable because she transcends her kind. The poet takes care to rebuke her in advance for the pride she may be guilty of on receiving his magnanimous compliment. The proper female virtues of cleanliness, decency and platonic friendship are repeatedly recommended throughout

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1 Poems, V. 2, pp. 722-27.

2 Poems, V. 2, pp. 727-32.

the Birthday poems. In such poems as 'Stella at Wood Park'[1] and 'Stella's Distress',[2] Swift does show a warm concern for Stella's physical well-being, but the tone is typically condescending.

Apart from the 'Stella' poems, one of the few poems dealing with women in which Swift maintains a generally detached and playful tone is 'Cadenus and Vanessa' (1713).[3] According to Harold Williams,[4] this is Swift's verse story of his friendship with Esther Vanhomrigh, written for Vanessa, and not intended for publication. Swift was forty-five years old when he wrote it. In the poem he offers some sort of excuse for a middle-aged bachelor - scholar's failure to respond to the passionate advances of his beautiful young pupil. In the case of this poem, the biographical connections between it and Swift's life are very clear; but, being partly biographical, it is also a very private poem, and the real reasons for Swift's rejection of Vanessa are not clear. Thus the poem is an especially complex and difficult one to deal with in purely literary terms. However, the values implicit in the poem do throw light on the later satires, in so far as they reveal an inability to come to terms with the physical aspect of female nature which is common to 'Cadenus and Vanessa' and the satires.

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1 Poems, V.2, pp. 748-752.
2 Poems, V.2, pp. 744-748.
3 Poems, V.2, pp. 686-714.
4 Poems, V.2, p. 683.

The following praise of Vanessa is non-ironic:

> From whence the tender Skin assumes
> A Sweetness above all Perfumes;
> From whence a Cleanliness remains,
> Incapable of outward Stains. (160-164)

But Vanessa's condition, thus described, is quite similar to that of Chloe in Strephon's deluded sight:

> And then, so nice, and so genteel;
> Such Cleanliness from Head to Heel:
> No Humours gross, or frowzy Steams,
> No noisom Whiffs, or sweaty Streams,
> Before, behind, above, below,
> Could from her taintless Body flow.[1] (9-14)

The second piece appears to be a parody of the first, yet the first contains Swift's own values; it is a statement of a position characteristic of Swift, a position, if not quite idiosyncratic, then surely Puritanical. Cleanliness is not only indicative of moral virtue, but is moral virtue. The Wesleyan coupling of cleanliness and godliness occurs repeatedly in Swift's verse, prose, fiction and personal writings. The obverse coupling of vice with filth is the basic metaphoric device in his satires on women, as it is in his more general satires on human nature. In Gulliver's Travels, it is the Yahoos' filth that represents for Gulliver all that is most odious in human behaviour, as it is the extreme cleanliness of the Houyhnhnms that arouses Gulliver's admiration.

Swift's choice of the machinery of a pseudo-mythical trial as the setting for the story of 'Cadenus and Vanessa' suggests to me a desire to handle a personal theme from a safe distance; the lengthy and rather tedious exposition also suggests an authorial unwillingness to get to the point. The 'Ideal of

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1 'Strephon and Chloe', Poems, V.2, pp. 584-593.

Love' being discussed is asexual, Platonic; again, this is a concept parodied in Strephon and Chloe:

> Can such a Deity endure
> A mortal human Touch impure? (89-90)

The nymphs blame the shepherds for degrading this ideal, but the shepherds accuse the nymphs of becoming victims of 'gross Desire'. (36):

> Their Passions move in lower Spheres,
> Where-e'er Caprice or Folly steers.
> A Dog, a Parrot, or an Ape,
> Or some worse Brute in human Shape.
> (37-40)

There is a suggestion of bestiality hovering somewhere here. It is my impression that where Swift has absolutely no tolerance for women who contravene his norms of behaviour, his attitude to the most virtuous of women is ambivalent. Female nature at its best is inferior to male. This is the implication of the device he uses to establish Vanessa as a female of special distinction. Vanessa receives from Venus the womanly virtues of Sweetness (161), Cleanliness (163), and Decency of Mind (164), but in order to gain the benefits of Wisdom, Knowledge, Judgement, Wit (205), she must be disguised as a male.[1] If the qualities that make a woman worthy of love are those proper to the male, then the only worthy woman is the surrogate male.[2] Unimproved women are vain and frivolous (328 ff). Certainly the Fops are treated with contempt too; to this minor extent the poem attacks the frivolous values of society in general, not only those of its female members.

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1 See also Swift, Journal to Stella ed. Harold Williams (Oxford, 1948) V.1, p. 90: 'I don't like women so much as I did. MD you must know are not women'.

2 See Irvin Ehrenpreis, Swift (London, 1967) V. 2, p. 651, '...except for Vanessa, all the women in the poem are vain, scandal mongering and vicious...Vanessa...is a miracle, not a normal woman. Cadenus... is quite natural and superior to all but Vanessa...therefore, it is a man's and not a woman's nature that triumphs'.

The one person who can appreciate Vanessa is Cadenus, her middle-aged tutor. She expresses a passion for him; he scolds her for the inappropriateness of her choice. In a later poem, 'The Progress of Marriage' (1721-22)[1] a similarly inappropriate attachment between a young beauty and an ageing scholar, but one which leads to marriage, is cruelly ridiculed. But 'Cadenus and Vanessa' is partly intended as a compliment to the lady, so her choice is praised faintly and rejected firmly. The reason given is that Cadenus understood not what was Love' (547). But beneath the playful tone of the narrative there is a hint of panic: lines 630 ff show Cadenus most concerned to excuse himself in the eyes of the world:

> How shall his Innocence be clear?
> Appearances were all so strong,
> The World must think him in the Wrong.
> (641-43)

Vanessa's view of love is almost identical with that in Swift's prose writings on ideal marriage. What is desired in both cases is a degree of intellectual communion, with the female mind distinctly lesser than and malleable by, the male; there is never a hint of physical Passion:

> Cadenus answers every End,
> The Book, the Author, and the Friend,
> The utmost her Desires will reach,
> Is but to learn what he can teach.
> (704-6)

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1 Poems, V.I, 289-95.

Such a concept is basic to the proper role of a wife, as defined by Swift in 'A Letter to a Young Lady on Her Marriage' (1723).[1] In 'A Letter...', Swift advises the new bride to make herself truly agreeable to her husband and to his male guests (of whom Swift himself was frequently one!). She should avoid other women because

> it will be hard to pick out one Female-Acquaintance in this Town, from whom you may not be in manifest Danger of contracting some Foppery, Affectation, Vanity, Folly or Vice (p.88).

The point is reiterated: 'I never yet knew a tolerable Woman to be fond of her own Sex' (p.88). A wife should be 'a reasonable Companion, and a True Friend' (p.86). Her behaviour should be extremely reserved. Swift cannot tolerate the sight of a fond wife doting on her husband (p.86). Marriage is for comfort, not for Romance. She will need the instruction and company of males, for women left to their own devices degenerate into extreme frivolity, 'hardly a degree above a Monkey; who hath more diverting Tricks than any of you' (p.91). Yet though she may with careful tutoring develop into a reasonable companion, she need not aspire to equality with men: 'after all the Pains you may be at, you can never arrive in Point of Learning, to the Perfection of a School-Boy'(p.92). Cleanliness, of course is insisted on, finery banned.[2]

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1 Swift, Works, ed. Davis (Oxford, 1948), hereafter referred to as Works, V.9, pp. 85-94.

2 Ruth Kelso, Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance (Illinois, 1956), p. 24, finds the following virtues praised in women: humility, sweetness, simplicity, peaceableness, kindness, piety, temperance, obedience, patience, charitableness.

Although the fictionalized Vanessa meets all these requirements, Cadenus is unable to respond to her passion. He changes the direction by embarking on a monologue urging the superiority of friendship to passionate love (772 ff). Vanessa remains unconvinced by these 'exalted strains' (791), and undertakes to instruct him in the arts of love - the literary arts of course. The outcome of this exercise is coyly withheld from the reader:

> But what Success Vanessa met,
> Is to the World a secret yet. (818-19).

The machinery of the trial is re-established (828 ff). Venus judges men guilty for their failure to appreciate Vanessa. The judgement is a compliment to Vanessa, the 'improved' woman, not to women in general, and the compliment, though lengthy, is ambiguous:[1] Cadenus gives no valid reason for rejecting Vanessa (in the poem that is; of course, in reality there could have been good reasons). It is this ambiguity that connects this scarcely ironic, tedious, scholarly debate with Swift's satires on women: in both cases there is internal evidence of the author's inability to accept female nature in any form. It seems, from the poems, that Swift, in the slight disguise of Cadenus, cannot love Vanessa because his image of her (later parodied in 'Strephon and Chloe') cannot be reconciled with his image of females as lewd, vicious and physically repellent. To return again to his 'Letter to a Young Lady...', I find significant the dramatic change of tone as the author passes from his description of the ideal wife to his opinion

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1 See Ehrenpreis, Swift, V. 2, p. 649: 'the inconclusiveness of the central episode of the poem suggests the ambiguous motives of a man who had never been able to live either with women or without them'.

of real women:

> There is never wanting in this Town, a Tribe of bold, swaggering, rattling Ladies ...I would recommend you to the Acquaintance of a common Prostitute, rather than to that of such Termagants as these. I have often thought that no Man is obliged to suppose such Creatures to be Women; but to treat them like insolent Rascals, disguised in Female Habits, who ought to be stripped and kicked down Stairs. 1

The violent, almost sadistic tone of this is disturbing in the same way as is the violent, primitive attack on the harlot in 'A Beautiful, Young Nymph...'[2] In the latter, the fact of its being a satire depersonalises the severity to some degree; in the 'Letter', such a qualification does not apply. There is an undeniable suggestion of extreme sexual hostility in Swift's recommendations for such aggressive physical violence towards women whose style offends him.[3]

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1 'A Letter to a Young Lady...', Works, v. 9, p. 93.

2 Poems, pp. 580-583.

3 There is a similar tone in Swift's 'Tale of a Tub', Works, V. 1, p.109, 'Last Week I saw a Woman flay'd, and you will hardly believe how much it altered her Person for the worse', though of course this is a dunce speaking.

CHAPTER 4

SWIFT'S SATIRES ON WOMEN

The following comment by Ehrenpreis on Swift's non-satiric poetry is interesting in that it could be applied aptly to the satirical poems as well:

> Such poetry is a protest against the literary and social tendency to debase women by neglecting their mental powers in compliments to their bodies. Swift implies that the whole fault with the normal attitude toward the sex was an obsession with externalities to the exclusion of mind or character. [1]

While an attempt, either satirical or non-satirical, to correct such an unbalanced view is perfectly legitimate, the picture that results from Swift's attempts is no more balanced. In his non-satiric poems the physical nature of women is simply omitted from consideration, with the result that the image of woman that emerges is virtuous but dull, and scarcely convincing. In the satiric poems, something quite different and quite disturbing happens. The obscene possibilities of female nature are dwelt on to such an extent that in the more excessive cases the specific object of the satire is lost, and the reader's impression is (to recall D.H. Lawrence) more of a disturbed writer than a disturbing subject.

In the earliest of the group of poems to be considered here, 'Phillis, or the Progress of Love' (1719),[2] there is no doubt about the object of attack. It is the female hypocrite,

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1 Ehrenpreis, Swift, V.2, p. 309.

2 Poems, V.1, pp. 221-25.

whose notions of love are derived from low literature instead of life:

> 'Tis always done, Romances tell us,
> When Daughters run away with Fellows.
> (47-48)

Like Strephon and Cassinus in later satires, she finds life shockingly different from literature. Her 'progress' is from delusions about love to the realities of prostitution and low living. Her fate fits her original folly, which was partly lewdness:

> If o'er against her you were plac't
> She durst not look above your Wast;
> She'd rather take you to her Bed
> Then let you see her dress her Head.
> (5 - 8)

Phillis is, presumably, to serve as sobering example of what is in store for young ladies silly enough to believe that 'marriages are made in heaven' (56). The tone of the poem is low, the verse characterized by vulgar rhymes which reinforce the vulgarity of the subject matter. Typical of this group of poems, it is the girl who is singled out for attack, rather than the society that produced her.

The next poem in this series, 'The Progress of Beauty' (1719),[1] anticipates in method and language both 'A Lady's Dressing Room' and 'A Beautiful Young Nymph...'. The basic satiric device is an analogy between the waning moon (Chastity) and the disintegration of mortal women. Swift employs as a metaphysical conceit for Diana's decline the philosophic assertion that matter cannot subsist without form (81-84). The moon shrinks as decayed pieces drop off. The irony is that while for the

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1 Poems, V. I, pp. 225-229.

moon there is a cyclical renewal, for the syphilitic Celia there is not. This is a different version of the harlot's fate from that which is the subject of 'A Beautiful Young Nymph...'[1] In the latter poem, a kind of daily renewal does take place, but it is an action both mechanical and dehumanised. The moral statement of 'Progress of Beauty' is the same as that of 'A Lady's Dressing Room':[2] beauty is an illusion which can only be sustained if viewed from a distance. Both Diana, the Moon, and Celia, the earthly 'nymph', are in reality ugly and decayed:

> When first Diana leaves her Bed
> Vapours and Steams her Looks disgrace,
> A frouzy dirty colour'd red
> Sits on her cloudy wrinkled Face.
> (1-4)

Celia's condition is parallel:

> To see her from her Pillow rise
> All reeking in a cloudy Steam
> Crackt Lips, foul Teeth, and gummy Eyes,
> Poor Strephon, how would he blaspheme!
> (13-16)

Like the 'Beautiful Young Nymph', Celia restores order to Chaos (45-48). Like Pope's Belinda,[3] Celia derives more satisfaction from the ritual than from the final effect.

The last stanza contains 'a peculiar Swiftean twist', that is, a sudden change of tone and an ambiguous rejection of what has preceded. The focus switches abruptly from the whore to the illusory world of nymphs and new moons. What is the

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1 Poems, V.2, pp. 580-583 .

2 Poems, V.2, pp. 524-530 .

3 Pope, 'Rape of the Lock',
> A heav'nly Image in the Glass appears,
> To that she bends, to that her Eyes she rears;
> The 'inferior Priestess, at her Altar's side,
> Trembling, begins the sacred Rites of Pride.
> (125-128) Canto I.

significance of this conclusion? The rest of the poem has asserted that everything female is decayed and corrupt. But the 'author', who has just exposed the illusion of Beauty, now requests 'new Nymphs' (120). Is the request ironic, or does it anticipate the swaggering pragmatism (also difficult to place) of 'A Lady's Dressing Room'?

> He soon would learn to think like me,
> And bless his ravisht Sight to see
> Such Order from Confusion sprung
> Such gaudy Tulips rais'd from Dung.
> (141-44)

The marriage held up to ridicule in 'The Progress of Marriage' (Jan. 1721-22)[1] was a real one:

> that of Dean Pratt to Lady Philippa Hamilton: Pratt died 5 Dec., 1721. He had only been married about twelve months... He was fond of society, something of a bon vivant, and incurred criticism for spending too much of his time in London instead of attending to his duties as Provost. Swift was on friendly terms with him. 2

In these circumstances, the scurrilousness of the attack is rather surprising. Bearing in mind 'Cadenus and Vanessa', it is tempting to suggest a biographical explanation: did this unsuitable marriage remind Swift of the two episodes in his own life (with Stella and with Vanessa) when he was in danger of making just such a fool of himself? Did he see in the fate of Dean Pratt a justification of his own decision to refrain from wedlock?

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1 Poems, V.I., pp.289-295.

2 Williams, in Poems, V.I, p289.

The poet, via the mythological deities, is contemptuous of the match from the outset (7 ff), and this contempt is reinforced by the effect of the jingling rhythms and doggerel rhymes. In Swift's other satire on wrong marriage, 'Strephon and Chloe',[1] the sexual implications of the wedding night are ignored; here, they provide the basic joke against the ill-matched pair. Strephon deludes himself that his bride is above all natural functions; the ageing Divine deludes himself that he is still capable of the sex act. Dean Pratt's marriage lacks all the proprieties so pompously enumerated by Swift in his 'Letter to a Young Lady...' His wife is an archetype of the spendthrift, vain, completely frivolous wife Swift inveighs against so often:

> the Vanity, the Folly, the Pride and Wantonness of their Wives, who under their present Corruptions seem to be a kind of animal suffered for our sins to be sent into the World for the destruction of Familyes, Societyes and Kingdoms 2

and

> It is absolutely so in fact that every husband of any fortune in the Kingdom is nourishing a poisonous, devouring serpent in his Bosom with all the mischief but with none of its wisdom. 3

The activities of the Dean and his spouse are equally trivial: he 'cheapens books' (39), she 'cheapens tea' (52). The Dean is punished for his folly by impotence and death. The wife is not to be rewarded long with her freedom and his estate -

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1 Poems, V.2, pp. 584-593.

2 Swift,'An Answer to Several Letters; Works, V.12, p.80. Here Swift is arguing against imports into Ireland that are ruinous to the economy of Ireland.

3 Swift, 'Weaver's Letters', Works, V.12, p.68 .

the poem ends with a curse on her: that she be seduced, defrauded, abandoned, and contract the pox. This seems a punishment somewhat disproportionate to the 'crime' of accepting an ageing husband. Though the moral purpose of the satire is to provide a warning against wrong marriage, the vindictive conclusion suggests personal spite rather than moral indignation.

'The Lady's Dressing Room' (1730)[1] is the first in the next group of poems which, as a group, are the most forceful, original and disturbing of any so far discussed. It is this group that has been called 'shocking', 'unprintable', and has for some critics provided evidence of Swift's madness. The critical (as opposed to pseudo-medical) question is whether these poems are successful satire and further, whether the 'shocking' nature of the material constitutes in the satirical context a poetic strength or a poetic weakness. The poems are of special interest to the student of Swift's writings because much of their poetic force comes from the Swiftean equation of vice with filth and virtue with cleanliness. This equation is made all through Swift's verse and prose writings, but is perhaps nowhere more dominant, and of no greater thematic significance than here. The poems are disturbing, as indeed it is proper for satires to be. The problem for the reader is in deciding just what it is in the poems that has this disturbing effect. There is typically in this group a lack of clarity in respect of the object of attack, a changing focus, which seems to constitute a weakness. The insecurity is bound up with the filth/vice, cleanliness/virtue identification. The following discussion

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1 Poems, V.2, pp.524-30.

of 'The Lady's Dressing Room' will, I hope, illustrate these problems.

The poem has the structure of a moral fable: the protagonist, Strephon, commits a misdemeanour and is punished. However the nature of the crime is never satisfactorily established, so there is difficulty in assessing the aptness or otherwise of the punishment. The poem is discussed in some detail by Maurice Johnson,[1] for whom it does hang together. He finds that it is made up of the two elements traditional to satire; it is 'written from moral and emotional compunctions', and is also an 'exercise in wit'[2]; Johnson finds the scatology an acceptable literary mode. He points out that

> this kind of scatology was not uncommon in the eighteenth century, e.g. Smollett's 'Adventures of an Atom', where excrement becomes a symbol for 'the antithesis of the sublime'.[3]

For Johnson, the obscenity has a reformist purpose and is therefore justified. He finds that women in their dressing rooms constitute for Swift a symbol of vanity, hypocrisy, the imperfection of mankind. This interpretation of the poem fails to take account of the part played by Strephon which, it seems to me, is as important a part of the moral structure as Celia's dressing room habits.

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1 Maurice Johnson, The Sin of Wit (Syracuse, 1950), pp. 114-121.

2 Johnson, p. 119.

3 Johnson, p. 117.

Brown's view of the poem as a satire against the pretensions and delusions of romantic literature[1] is not unfounded: Celia is 'a Goddess' (3); there are frequent mock heroic literary illusions, e.g. 'As from within Pandora's Box' (84 ff), and the allusion to Milton: 'Those secrets of the hoary deep' (98)[2]. But what of Strephon? The Narrator tells us that he is punished by 'Vengeance' for his peeping (120). Who or what is being avenged? Not Celia, for she is an object of satire too. As for 'his peeping', illicit and voyeuristic it may be, but it is also a pursuit of Truth (a pose typical of the satirist). If Strephon is punished only for 'peeping', then the implication is that lovers have no right to the truth, that theirs is necessarily a state of illusion. If this is the moral, then the punishment should be directed solely against Strephon for contravening the decorum of his position. The punishment, the shocking (for him) encounter with truth, i.e. the evidence that Celia shits, is appropriate. This is what happens in 'Cassinus and Peter'.[3] But this view of the satiric purpose of 'The Lady's Dressing Room' fails to account for the detailed, horrific description of Celia's dirty habits (there is no such addition in 'Cassinus and Peter'), and for the last twenty lines of the poem. So one must ask what else the poem is about.

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1 Brown, Life Against Death, pp. 186-87.

2 Milton, Paradise Lost, II, 890-91.

3 Poems, V.2, pp. 593-597.

Affectively, the poem is mainly about, not Strephon, but Celia, or Celia's room. From this viewpoint, the poem is only peripherally an attack on Platonic notions of Love, and mainly an attack on dirty women. This latter is Swift's own view of the poem. It is worth noting that in 'A Modest Defence of the Lady's Dressing Room', (first published by Faulkner in 1746),[1] Swift insists that the poem attacks dirty women:

> Cleanliness hath, in all polite Ages and Nations, been esteemed the chief corporeal Perfection in Women. 1

The poem is an attack on all those who lack this perfection. Swift defends the poem as 'satirical' against the charge that it over-steps the bounds of Decency:

> No Poem was ever written with a better design for the Service of the Sex: wherein our Author hath observed to a Tittle, the precepts of his Master Horace; or indeed, rather hath gone very far, beyond him, in the Article of Decency. 1

He proceeds to quote and translate the ten lines from Horace on which the most offensive section of 'The Lady's Dressing Room' is based, in order to demonstrate the relative delicacy of his own lines.

Cleanliness, it would seem, constitutes a virtue for Swift in his non-ironic writing as well as in his satires. Although Gulliver's excessive concern for cleanliness is treated ironically, cleanliness remains a concept of major thematic significance in Gulliver's Travels. One of Gulliver's first

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1 Swift, Works, V.5, p.338.

concerns is to assure the readers of his cleanliness: he describes in detail the process by which the Lilliputans dispose of his faeces and adds:

> I would not have dwelt so long upon a circumstance, that at first sight may perhaps appear not very momentous, if I had not thought it necessary to justify my character in point of cleanliness to the world. 1

The perfectly rational creatures Gulliver encounters and admires so uncritically are, above all else, clean. Conversely, the Yahoos, the most repulsive of Swift's inventions, are excessively filthy, particularly in their aggressive use of their excreta. When Gulliver described how the Yahoos discharged their excrements on him, and he 'was almost stifled with the filth, which fell about me on every side', [2] his claustrophobia is similar to that which overwhelms Strephon in Celia's room. Gulliver's fastidiousness finally drives him mad. The Yahoos, like the Houyhnhnms, are instruments of the satire of which Gulliver himself is the object. Although Strephon too is a dunce, it is not clear that Celia's filthiness falls into place as a way of exposing his delusions. The focus of the attack remains blurred. Is it Strephon, or is it, as Swift himself claims, dirty women? Strephon's punishment is much greater: all women are rendered undesirable for him. Celia only loses Strephon, who is a dunce anyway. The Narrator continues to admire her.

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1 Swift, Gulliver's Travels, ed. Louis Landa, p. 23.

2 Gulliver's Travels, p. 182.

Strephon's vision of 'reality' is in fact, another distortion, close up and magnified like the vision of Gulliver astride the nipple of the giant girl:

> I must confess no object ever disgusted me so much as the sight of her monstrous breast. [1]

Gulliver presents this perspective as reality; all women are monstrous when seen properly, i.e. through a magnifying glass:

> This made me reflect upon the fair skins of our English ladies, who appear so beautiful to us, only because they are of our own size, and their defects not to be seen but through a magnifying glass, where we find by experiment that the smoothest and the whitest skins look rough and coarse, and ill coloured. [1]

There is another aspect to the vice/filth equation underlying so much of Swift's writings, that of sexuality. Virtue is asexual, vice is sexual. Sexuality, like filth, not only disgusts Gulliver, it terrifies him. When he is approached sexually by a young female Yahoo, he takes flight. The tendency increases: when he returns from his adventures, he falls into a swoon of horror at the embrace of his wife. Though there is no explicit sexual experience in Strephon's adventure, the whole atmosphere is voyeuristic, and Strephon is reduced to a kind of sexual impotence:

> His foul Imagination links
> Each Dame he sees with all her Stinks.
> (121-22)

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1 Gulliver's Travels, p. 74.

But Strephon like Gulliver is the object of satire. The satiric distance between the author and Strephon is emphasised by the introduction of a satiric persona in the last twenty lines: the Narrator speaking in the first person. The confusing aspect of what the Narrator has to say about Strephon's adventure is that he offers a different version of Strephon's crime, one in which Celia's dirtiness is a peripheral, not a central, element. The Narrator seems to speak with the voice of Reason: he is not affected with Strephon's delusions about women, so he is not vulnerable to the shock Strephon suffers on encountering evidence of Celia's mortality. He is not in a state of ignorance about what lies behind the facade of female beauty, but he is able to ignore it, and enjoy

> Such Order from Confusion sprung,
> Such gaudy Tulips rais'd from Dung.
> (143-44)

The neatly parallel images of this final couplet conclude the satire on a note of urbanity, defusing the horror of Strephon's experience. Strephon is advised to imitate the Narrator and 'Stop his nose'; but this advice contradicts the punishment inflicted on Strephon by Vengeance. So at this stage it is unclear whether Strephon is being punished for his peeping, or for his illusions; for his discovery of the smell, or his inability to stop his nose. In the same way it is unclear whether the Narrator's contribution is the voice of reason or just swagger. Certainly, it diverts the reader's attention from the disgusting room, and refocuses it on Strephon the fool. It is finally unclear whether the Narrator (and all rational people) really can admire the 'Gaudy Tulips rais'd from Dung',

or whether he too is deluding himself. All the poetic force of the poem comes from the description of the room; thus this final and ambiguous diversion is unsatisfactory.

The direction accompanying the title of 'A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed', 1735,[1] is that it is 'written for the Honour of the Fair Sex...'. Although it was also, presumably, written as a warning to men who visited prostitutes, the direction of the title, together with the fact that the poem focuses exclusively on Corinna, classify the poem as a satire on women. Corinna is a prototype for all women. The ritual of beautification she follows is not a ritual followed only by prostitutes; it is a recognizable parody of the ritual followed by all women of fashion, the virtuous as well as the vicious. The 'Nymph' 'Pulls out the Rags contriv'd to prop Her flabby Dugs and down they drop' (21-22). Katherine Rogers comments that 'although this description pertains to a prostitute, its exceptional nastiness should not obscure the fact that the same thing happens when many virtuous women remove their brassieres'.[2] That high life as well as low is included in the attack is suggested by the mock pastoral opening:

> Corinna, Pride of Drury-Lane,
> For whom no Shepherd sighs in vain.
> (1 - 2)

The parody continues as Corinna dismantles her charms; the verbs in this description, taken out of context, suggest an eager lover's voyage of discovery: 'unlaces', 'off she slips', 'with gentlest touch', 'she next explores'. The facile jingling

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1 Poems, V.2, pp. 580-83.

2 Katherine M. Rogers, "'My Female Friends': The Misogyny of Jonathan Swift," p. 368.

rhymes are juxtaposed with the disgusting content to effect shock. In 'The Lady's Dressing Room', filth, at least in Strephon's view, is a crime; here ugliness is identified with vice. Corinna is attacked more for the maladroitness of her disguise than for its immoral purpose; the tone suggests motives of vengeance rather than moral outrage. The satirist revels in the pains of love that afflict Corinna: prison, the lash, transportation. Reference to these institutionalized punishments widens the range of the satire: the prostitute is placed in a social context. Even so, the satirist does not attack society. There is no suggestion that prostitution is as much a result as a cause of social evils. This seems to me a weakness: if Swift is attacking prostitution as an institution, then to focus the attack exclusively on the prostitute herself is unsatisfactory. The Shepherds of Drury Lane are equally involved in the trade, yet are only mentioned in passing.

As in 'The Lady's Dressing Room', the atmosphere is voyeuristic, created this time by authorial coyness:

> The bashful Muse will never bear
> In such a Scene to interfere.
> (71-72)

Overt sexuality is strangely absent. Although the prostitute's body is examined in intimate detail by the Peeping Tom, his discoveries lack titillation. Like Celia's room, Corinna's body is sexually revolting. This latter aspect constitutes an oddness, found in all these poems, which partly accounts for the reader's difficulty with them. They are full of lovers, or would be lovers, and immoral or lewd ladies, yet there is

virtually no explicit sexual activity. Yet the voyeuristic atmosphere has sexual connotations, so that the reader is left with the impression that filth is a symbol of sexuality. Further, and this is a peculiarly Swiftean phenomenon, sex is always totally repulsive, never titillating. Robert Hunting describes this poem in the following terms:

> ... it is a photograph whose limitations, and distortions - and power - are explained by the fact that it was taken through a keyhole, by a Peeping Tom, ... who was morally outraged by what he saw. 1

I agree that the keyhole view is a powerfully distorting one, but I question the conclusion that the peeper's outrage is 'moral'. In the terms of the satire, the prostitute is not actually immoral; there is no evidence that she harms anyone except herself. Her crime is that she is ugly. There is a strong implication in this poem that this is how <u>all</u> women are without their contrivances: the detailed attention to the minutiae of her accessories, 'Her Eyebrows from a Mouse's Hyde', etc. divert the reader's attention from any 'moral' issue. The sexual revulsion is there too: Corinna is not a lewd and lusty female, she is a machine - a sex machine. The 'Steel-Rib'd Bodice' works by 'an Operator's Skill'; 'Up goes her Hand' suggests the non-autonomous action of a robot. There is nothing seductive in this vision - the attack in fact seems to be not on sexual licence but on female artifice, and therefore, on all those ladies, virtuous as well as vicious, who conceal ugly reality with attractive illusion. To launch an attack on female artifice

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1 Robert Hunting, <u>Jonathan Swift</u>, p. 77.

via the tricks of a prostitute constitutes a disproportionate insult to the sex. The moral of the attack is obscure.

The heroine of 'Strephon and Chloe' (1731)[1] is another false goddess. As I have suggested earlier, Chloe is a parody of the marvellous Vanessa. Like Vanessa, she is remarkable for her cleanliness and decency; her 'divinity' is defined in terms of her apparent freedom from the necessities of nature. But the concept is deflated from the outset:

> Of Chloe all the Town has rung;
> By ev'ry size of Poets sung.
> (1 - 2)

The poet continues the process by alternating extravagant literary praise with ugly realism:

> No noisom Whiffs, or sweaty Streams,
> Before, behind, above, below,
> Could from her taintless Body flow.
> (12-14)

and:

> None ever saw her pluck a Rose.
> Her dearest Comrades never caught her
> Squat on her Hams, to make Maid's Water.
> (16-19)

By such negative descriptions of Chloe's virtues, the poet debunks the Goddess image from the start, but Strephon retains his delusions until the wedding night. Swift had earlier attacked wrong marriage in the scurrilous 'Progress of Marriage' by dramatizing the indignities such a match inflicts on the spouses. Strephon and Chloe are a different pair; they are a 'charming' couple, whose union is blessed by the appropriate

1. Poems, v. 2, pp. 584-593.

deities. Their folly, or specifically Strephon's folly, is in holding a romantic view of marriage. He believes that wives, like mistresses worshipped from afar, can be goddesses. He fails to realise that the purpose of the charming wedding rites is to effect the metamorphosis of goddess Chloe into a mortal, and therefore fully physical, woman. He is overwhelmed with shame by his awareness of his own mortality, and cuts a comic figure, beard emerging from his lace night-cap. His fear of revealing his mortality is so expressed as to suggest a deeper sexual fear. Again, there is no overt reference to sexuality, an odd omission, as this is the wedding night and sexual consummation is the purpose of their being in bed together. But Strephon's articulated fears that he will sweat and smell and appear ugly to Chloe suggest a fear of sexual contact. The following lines contain further evidence of this fear:

> But, what if he should lose his Life
> By vent'ring on his heav'nly Wife?
> For Strephon could remember well,
> That, once he heard a School-boy tell,
> How Semele of mortal Race,
> By Thunder dy'd in Jove's Embrace.
> (103-108)

The issue is not pursued beyond this point, but that it is raised at all suggests that the satire has a more complex aim than merely debunking Strephon's romantic notions. This poem, like the previous ones, seems to contain an aura of horror of female physicality, which is not a controlled element of the satire, but a disturbing intrusion.

The rest of the narrative does not disperse this impression. The poem continues in mock pastoral vein up to the moment of truth when Strephon realises that Chloe's resistance to his overtures is motivated not by maidenly modesty but by the need to empty her bladder. Strephon's delusions prove as fragile as they were fantastic: he responds to the situation by copying, or rather improving on, her indelicate performance:

> And as he fill'd the reeking Vase,
> Let fly a Rouzer in her Face. (191-92)

The switch from pastoral romanticism to crude realism is sudden and complete:

> ... fine Ideas vanish fast,
> While all the gross and filthy last.
> (233-34)

The poem argues not only that delusions are bound to be destroyed by contact with reality, but that the ensuing reality is necessarily gross. As in 'The Lady's Dressing Room', there is a confusing change of focus occasioned by the introduction of a satiric persona (235 ff.) offering moral comment on the episode. Again, the persona adopts a superior, detached position, and proceeds to point out the error of Strephon's ways. But his stance is somewhat contradictory: he claims that had Strephon 'through a Cranny spy'd' Chloe on the privy he would not have fallen in love. Falling in love is a fate so awful that 'it were better you had lickt her leavings' (242). In 'The Lady's Dressing Room' it turns out that Strephon is punished not so much for seeking the truth as for being unable to accept it when he finds it - for failing to stop his nose. Here, his

discomfiture is caused by Chloe's failure to preserve the illusion that she has no natural needs. So realism is advocated for men but the physical realities of women are so gross they must always be concealed.[1]

At about *l*.250, the poem falls into two parts, not clearly related. Part I argues that any man who falls in love is a fool because his state indicates his ignorance of the natural (and disgusting) functions of women. In order to avoid such folly, he should become a voyeur and acquaint himself with the nasty reality before committing himself to marriage. Part II argues that a man can aspire sensibly to marriage after all, right marriage based on prudence and good nature instead of Beauty, on Friendship rather than Rapture. But Part II is not a logical alternative to Part I. Even the most decent female is not free of physical functions; Part II does not assimilate this fact. Is not the Narrator of Part II deluding himself as much as Strephon in Part I? The 'mutual gentle Fire' (313) is too far removed from the 'great Society in Stinking'(210). Friendship has not been brought to terms with Nature.

'Cassinus and Peter'[2] is the last of the three 'unprintable' poems which were published together in 1734. It provides the fewest problems for the reader. The satiric elements are much more controlled than in the previous two poems, and the poem has one clear focus throughout. That focus is Cassinus, the deluded

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1 There is support for this generalization in the Journal to Stella, where Swift repeatedly advises Stella to be clean and modest, but inflicts on her an unselfconscious and detailed description of some particularly revolting sores he is suffering from. See Journal to Stella, V.2, XLIV, p. 528.

2 Poems, V.2, pp. 593-97.

Platonic lover who is driven out of his wits by the discovery that his mistress shits. Certainly, this figure has appeared before, in 'Strephon and Chloe' and 'The Lady's Dressing Room', but in both those cases the deluded lover was only peripherally the butt of the satire, which was directed mainly against the physical functions of women. In 'Cassinus and Peter', Swift avoids both the abrupt changes in direction and unassimilated moralising that weaken the other two poems. This is a satire in the mood of comedy rather than outrage. The only person outraged is Cassinus; for everyone else Cassinus is a joke. This is quite different from the situation in 'The Lady's Dressing Room', where Strephon's outrage spills over onto the reader, mostly because Swift creates such an effectively horrible vision of Celia's filthiness. The aim is simpler in 'Cassinus and Peter'; what is attacked is Cassinus' failure to reconcile his romantic notions with human reality; female reality that is, for he doesn't seem at all disturbed by his own less than wholesome state:

> One greasy Stocking round his Head,
> The t'other he sat down to darn
> With Threads of diff'rent colour'd Yarn.
> His Breeches torn exposing wide
> A ragged Shirt, and tawny Hyde.
> (12-16)

There is no general attack on women; only on Cassinus' mistaken notions about them. That Celia shits horrifies only Cassinus. The poet does not elaborate this fact, as he does so grotesquely in 'The Lady's Dressing Room' and 'Strephon and Chloe'. The statement serves merely as a deflating device, witty and final. Cassinus is a dunce; like Gulliver his mind is finally deranged by

his inability to accept human nature. His literary delusions are not destroyed by the shock; his language remains affected and romantic: 'think Peter, how my soul is rack'd' (97). The final stanza is mock heroic; the joke is on Cassinus. No 'moral' is articulated by a satiric persona, but none is needed. The poem is a brisk and effective satire.

CHAPTER 5

ROCHESTER, YOUNG, POPE AND SATIRES ON WOMEN

Swift is not singled out for his notorious attacks on women by Alexander, a social historian of the period. Alexander regards Swift as only one of a large group who dishonoured women in this way:

> When this kind of gallantry which taught every man to consider every woman as a kind of superior being had wore itself out by the most extravagant exertions, the minds of men took an opposite direction, and began to consider the sex, either in a diminutive, or contumelious light; looking upon them, either as the play-things of a sportive hour, or the mere instruments of animal pleasure; divesting them of almost all sentiment, and avoiding almost all serious connection with them. In England, the libertinism of the courts of Charles II first debauched the morals of almost all the women, and then taught the men to despise them for the want of what they themselves had robbed them of. Things having taken this turn, it soon became fashionable to write against the women, as it had been before to write in their favour. The Earl of Rochester set the example, and it was soon followed by Pope, Swift, Young, and a variety of other inferior scribblers; all of whom assert, that their intention was thereby to reclaim a sex, which, in the prosecution of vice and folly, had resisted every other effort. But if such really was their intention, which there are some reasons to doubt; the event has shewn how ill it was adapted to the purposes intended; the praises bestowed on women in former times, fired them with a great and virtuous emulation; the satire thrown out against them by the writers we have mentioned, has only incited their indignation, instead of amending their heart. [1]

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1 Alexander, The History of Women from the Earliest Antiquity, V.1, pp.9-10.

It is not hard to accept Alexander's account of the effect of the satires. Though the satirists claim a corrective purpose, satires like Swift's are so insulting that one cannot imagine many ladies taking advice from them. It seems to me however that by grouping Swift and Rochester together, as if their methods and objects were the same, Alexander overlooks the fact that their views on women were quite dissimilar, and in their satires female dirt and lewdness are made to serve quite different ends.

Swift's indulgence in detailed accounts of the disgusting personal habits of women usually amounts to a direct attack on the sex. Rochester's satires do not spare women, but in most cases amount to an attack on male egotism. I do not detect in Rochester an anti-female bias, an underlying assumption that women are naturally more lewd, more self-deceiving, more hypocritical than men. Nor does cleanliness have the status of a moral virtue; it is recommended, but only in order to make the performance of illicit acts more pleasurable:

> If thou wouldst have me true, be wise
> And take to cleanly sinning;
> None but fresh lovers' pricks can rise
> At Phyllis in foul linen. [1]
> (13-16)

In Rochester's brilliant satire against Restoration Society, 'A Ramble in St James Park',[2] the attack is directed against a female, Corinna. Although in some ways similar to

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1 The Complete Poems of John Wilmot Earl of Rochester, hereafter referred to as Rochester's Poems, ed. David M. Vieth (New Haven, 1968), 'Song', p. 139.

2 Rochester's Poems, pp. 40-46.

a Celia or a Corinna in Swift's verse, Rochester's Corinna is significantly different. Like Swift's Corinna, she is presented in the first place as a 'goddess':

> Whoever had been by to see
> The proud disdain she cast on me
> Through charming eyes, he would have swore
> She dropped from heaven that very hour .
>
> (35-38)

The falsity of this vision is swiftly exposed. The debunking is done by a satiric persona, an element much more prominent here than in Swift's poems. The character of the persona, swaggering, bawdy, is established in some detail in the opening section (1-32). His function in the poem is not merely to point a moral, but to provide in himself another dramatic example of the corrupt morals he poses as attacking. This kind of complexity in the character of the persona is an important element in Gulliver's Travels, but is not characteristic of Swift's verse satires. Rochester exploits the device very effectively: because Corinna's activities are described by someone himself just as lewd and promiscuous, the obscenity of the account is easily attributed to the persona and not to the poet; the poet need not observe any proprieties at all in the account (indeed, he does not).

The satire, offensive though it might be in terms of taste, does make a kind of moral sense: Rochester explores a corrupt society whose corruption is embodied in its sexual mores.

Corinna is the female exemplar of this society. Aptly her vice is promiscuity. And the persona exposes her vice aptly, that is, by describing her promiscuous activities in terms as vile as possible. Up to a point, this is the method followed by Swift in 'The Lady's Dressing Room': Celia's vice is filthiness, the method of exposing this vice is to give a detailed and damning account of her slatternly practices. But the climax of this account is the revelation that 'Celia shits'. While this revelation works in terms of the other object of the satire, that is it dramatically disabuses Strephon of the notion that Celia is a deity, it is not appropriate as a climactic image of Celia's dirtiness, since it is simply a physical fact, and morally neutral. The climactic image of Rochester's Corinna 'Drench'd with the seed of half the town' (114) does work, because it is an appropriately obscene vision of a promiscuous woman.

Where the role of Celia in 'The Lady's Dressing Room', is ambiguous (is she meant to disgust the reader or only Strephon?), that of Corinna in 'A Ramble...' is not. Nor is that of the satiric persona : he too is an object of attack, for while he pretends to be morally outraged by Corinna's behaviour, his outburst is in fact motivated by sexual jealousy and injured sexual pride:

> And may no woman better thrive
> That dares profane the cunt I swive!
> (165-166)

This motivation is characteristic of the personae in Rochester's satire generally. Injured sexual pride is the subject

of 'The Imperfect Enjoyment',[1] where the lover raves and boasts but fails to recover his virility. The male lovers are constantly exposing their own follies: even in 'To a Lady in a Letter'[2] which attacks female lust, the 'satirist' acknowledges his own frailty:

> Whilst I, my pleasure to pursue,
> Whole nights am taking in
> The lusty juice of grapes, take you
> The juice of lusty men.
>
> (29-33)

There seems little to choose, morally, between the two forms of indulgence. In 'Upon His Leaving His Mistress',[3] the altruism of the persona, offered as an excuse for discarding his mistress, is obviously feigned. When Rochester attacks prostitution by referring to venereal disease, the harlot is not the only victim, as in Swift's 'A Beautiful Young Nymph....' :

> They carry a fate which no man can oppose:
> The loss of his heart and the fall of his nose.[4]
>
> (8 - 9)

Perhaps the ultimate attack on male vanity via female lewdness is the very bawdy 'Signior Dildo',[5] The poem exposes the folly of those men who consider themselves essential to the ladies'

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1 Rochester's Poems, pp. 37-40.

2 As above pp. 84-85.

3 As above p. 81.

4 'On the Women About Town', Rochester's Poems, pp. 46-47.

5 As above pp. 54-59.

pleasure; the ladies in the poem find the dildo more satisfactory in every way. As well as extreme lewdness, the poem attributes to women an unhypocritical pragmatism.

A comparison of the frivolous treatment of ladies' boudoir habits in this poem with the foul, claustrophobic atmosphere of Swift's 'Lady's Dressing Room' illustrates how radically different were the sensibilities and the values of the two poets. The significant effect, so far as this thesis is concerned, of this difference in sensibility is seen in their differing attitudes to women. Rochester's hags and prostitutes may be guilty of all kinds of obscene practices, but they are never entirely repugnant (at least as far as the satiric persona is concerned). Swift's, usually guilty of much less, are always completely loathsome. A satiric persona in Swift's verse never makes the complaint so typical of Rochester:

> But mark what creatures women are:
> How infinitely vile, when fair!
> ('A Ramble...', 41-42).

When the poet poses as voyeur in Rochester's 'Fair Chloris in a pigsty lay',[1] he sees a sexual performance; in a corresponding position in Swift, for all the sexual atmosphere, the voyeur only discovers that the woman defecates. The chief hypocrisy in women Rochester attacks is the pretence of modesty (again, see 'Fair Chloris'). Their lustfulness is folly, not intrinsically, but

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1 Rochester's Poems, pp. 27-28.

because they try to conceal it. Female hypocrisy in Swift's poems is quite another matter: his women paint to cover their wrinkles, and pad to conceal disease: they strive to hide, not healthy lust, but dirt and ugliness. Their desires are for praise and for finery. Generally, they do not experience lust. Nor do their lovers. Strephon and Cassinus seek a platonic vision, not a mortal mistress. When their illusions are shattered, they find real women completely repulsive. Where Rochester's females are teasingly vile and fair at the same time, Swift's are either unattainably fair, or totally vile.

This comparison of Swift with Rochester suggests to me that whereas the women in Rochester's verse are proper objects of satire because they are guilty of corrigible vices and follies, this is rarely the case with Swift. It seems that Swift, under an elaborate superstructure involving platonic lovers, etc., is really attacking female physicality; not corrigible, not vicious, and not, therefore, a proper object for satire.

Young's satires on women, Satires V and VI in 'Love of Fame, the Universal Passion', (1725-1728)[1] are relevant here in so far as they constitute a completely different kind of satirical attack on the female sex from those so far considered. They are exercises in wit rather than expressions of outrage. Young takes for his guide Horace, who 'appears in good humour while he censures'.[2] According to Young's theory of satire, ridicule

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1 Edward Young The Complete Works, ed. James Nichols (London, 1854, reprinted Hildesheim 1968), pp. 344-409.

2 As above, Preface p.345.

is the most effective weapon for attacking vice. His stance is moralistic

> the general conduct of mankind is by no means a thing indifferent to a reasonable and virtuous man. Now, to smile at it, and turn it into ridicule, I think most eligible; as it hurts ourselves least, and gives Vice and Folly the greatest offence. [1]

The satires consist of a catalogue of feminine follies personified in a very general way. The characters are never more than types. This lack of individualisation together with the predominant tone of detached amusement produces an effect of blandness. The regular, well-turned couplets provide insufficient verbal interest to compensate for the lack of any dramatic element. There is no satiric persona though a good deal of overt moralising.

Satire V (pp. 376-389) begins with a quotation from 'Paradise Lost', and it is Milton's view of female virtue that Young holds up as exemplary. Women are not, or should not be, involved in the world; their proper function is to provide a peaceful backwater where men can retire for comfort:

> ...a female friend's endearing smile;
> A tender smile, our sorrows' only balm,
> And, in life's tempest, the sad sailor's calm.
> (106-8)

Women are warned on the one hand that 'Men love a mistress, as they love a feast' (309), and on the other 'Your sex's glory 'tis, to shine unknown' (567). The argument is a familiar one:

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1 Young, p. 345.

women are there to amuse men at men's whim; otherwise they should not assert themselves in any way. Young parades, with boring repetition, all kinds of female follies, without ever suggesting that the society from which they come should be satirised too. Lines such as

> Ladies supreme among amusements reign,
> By nature born to sooth and entertain.
> Their prudence in a share of folly lies:
> Why will they be so weak as to be wise? Satire VI.
> (191-94)

reveal an attitude to women so patronising and so smug that one expects it to be deflated at some stage. It never is. It is probably this lack of interaction between the poet (or 'poet's voice') and the subject matter that renders these not unwitty nor uninventive poems ultimately tedious and forgettable. Whilst the reader cannot complain, as one wants to in respect of Swift's satires, that something confused and outrageous is going on beneath the surface structure of the poems, one can complain of boredom. Because a feeling of real indignation is lacking, the satire, though it hits clearly at its object, does no harm.

Pope's 'Epistle to a Lady' (1732-4)[1], like Young's satires V and VI, is a series of caricatures of female folly. But it has a unifying theme: women have only two ruling passions, love of pleasure and love of sway (209). Pope's satire is more vigorous than Young's, more engaging, and although Pope maintains the same detached attitude as Young, some of the portraits in

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1 Poems of Alexander Pope, Twickenham edition, V.3, ii, ed. Bateson, (1951) pp. 38-71.

the 'Epistle' are individualized sufficiently to provide dramatic interest. Like Rochester, Pope believes that 'ev'ry woman is at heart a rake' (216), though his method of establishing this is much more polite than the Restoration poet's. Pope arraigns women for a variety of standard follies but he does not express the kind of serious repugnance for the sex that characterises Swift's verse. For Pope, women's faults are part of their charm:

> Ladies, like variegated Tulips, show,
> 'Tis to their Changes half their charms we owe;
> Their happy Spots the nice admirer take,
> Fine by defect, and delicately weak.
> (41-44)

He is not, as Swift often appears to be, obsessed with the physical nature of women. Dirtiness and sexual licence are as trivial and typical as vanity and painting. Yet in his concise epigrammatic style, Pope makes criticisms as severe as Swift's:

> Narcissa's nature, tolerably mild,
> To make a wash, would hardly stew a child.
> (53-54)

Pope does not like sluts either; yet his compressed caricature of Sappho, a lady quite as negligent in her personal habits as Swift's Celia, seems to direct all our attention to the satiric picture, and does not leave us wondering about the satirist's psyche:

> Rufa, whose eye quick-glancing o'er the Park,
> Attracts each light gay meteor of a Spark,
> Agrees as ill with Rufa studying Locke,
> As Sappho's diamonds with her dirty smock,
> Or Sappho at her toilet's greazy task,
> With Sappho fragrant at an evening Mask:
> So morning Insects that in muck begun,
> Shine, buzz, and fly-blow in the setting sun.
> (21-28)

Like Swift, Pope is capable of extreme harshness towards women; the character of Atossa is ruthlessly exposed 'from loveless youth to unrespected age' (125). Pope too exhorts women to develop lasting qualities of the mind instead of lavishing attention on their physical appearance and the trivia of social mores. The positive values implied in 'Epistle to a Lady' are not very different from those Swift recommends: women should be modest, temperate, generous, discreet (249-59). For Pope, these qualities do not make a woman equal to a man, but only acceptable to him. The argument is similar to that in 'Cadenus and Vanessa': a woman can be improved by acquiring male virtues but then she becomes untypical of her sex:

> And yet, believe me, good as well as ill,
> Woman's at best a Contradiction still.
> Heav'n, when it strives to polish all it can
> Its last best work, but forms a softer Man.
> (269-72)

The 'Epistle' ends with a direct compliment to Martha Blount, the lady to whom it was addressed, and who, like Swift's Stella, was blessed with 'sense, good humour, and a poet'.

Martha Blount is also the recipient of another short epistle 'To Miss Blount with the Works of Voiture'[1] where Pope presents the spinster's role rather more positively. In its attack

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1 Pope, Twickenham V.6, pp. 62-65.

on marriage, this epistle takes a surprisingly feminist line:

> Still in constraint your suff'ring sex remains
> Or bound in formal or in real chains:
> Whole years neglected, for some months adored,
> The fawning servant turns a haughty lord
> Ah quit not the free innocence of life
> For the dull glory of a virtuous wife.
> (41-46)

These sentiments suggest to me a deeper concern for the condition of women than Swift's 'Journal to Stella', where for all the warmth and intimacy of Swift's letters, the final picture is of Stella repaied for her patience and fidelity by long and serious neglect.

To return to 'Epistle to A Lady', the satire is harsh and clever, but of a social rather than a moral kind (concerned with social mores rather than social evils). Because of this social nature of the satire, and the attitude of detachment that characterises it, the work must be regarded as differing markedly in purpose and methods from Swift's satires, and so useful comparisons are few. The most interesting comparison for the purposes of my argument is this: Pope's 'Epistle to a Lady' illustrates the point that forceful satire need not provide the sorts of problems Swift's satires do. The 'Epistle' does not go beyond the decorum of satire and attack what is not corrigible, nor does it leave the reader with the uneasy feeling that the poet cannot control his subject matter.

Both these things happen in Swift's satires on women. It seems to me that the very intensity of Swift's reactions to those women who violate his standards of acceptability, that

same intensity which is surely responsible for the originality and dramatic force of the satires, is also the cause of the confusion of direction and thematically unjustified wallowing in filth that renders them ultimately flawed, unsatisfactory creations.

This intense hostility to women can no doubt be accounted for by certain biographical facts from Swift's life; but this is not a critical issue. What is at issue here is that the poems, memorable and disturbing as they are, required a tighter control of their subject matter than Swift, for whatever reason, was able to achieve.

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